

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MORES

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103. Degenerate and evil mores. Mores of advance and decline, The case is somewhat different when attempts are made by positive efforts to prevent the operation of bad mores, or to abolish them. The historians have familiarized us with the notion of corrupt or degenerate mores. Such periods as the later Roman empire, the Byzantine empire, the Merovingian kingdom, and the Renaissance offer us examples of evil mores. We need to give more exactitude to this idea. Bad mores are those which are not well fitted to the conditions and needs of the society at the time. But, as we have seen, the mores produce a philosophy of welfare, more or less complete, and they produce taboos which are concentrated inhibitions directed against conduct which the philosophy regards as harmful, or positive injunctions to do what is judged expedient and beneficial. The taboos constitute morality or a moral system which, in higher civilization, restrains passion and appetite, and curbs the will. Various conjunctures arise in which the taboos are weakened or the sanctions on them are withdrawn. Faith in the current religion may be lost. Then its mystic sanctions cease to operate. The political institutions may be weak or unfit, and the civil sanctions may fail. There may not be the necessary harmony between economic conditions and political institutions, or the classes which hold the social forces in their hands may misuse them for their selfish interest at the expense of others. The philosophical and ethical generalizations which are produced by the mores rise into a realm of intellect and reason which is proud, noble, and grand. The

power of the intelligence is a human prerogative. If the power is correctly used the scope of achievement in the satisfaction of needs is enormously extended. The penalty of error in that domain is correspondingly great. When the mores go wrong it is, above all, on account of error in the attempt to employ the philosophical and ethical generalizations in order to impose upon mores and institutions a movement towards selected and "ideal" results which the ruling powers of the society have determined to aim at. Then the energy of the society may be diverted from its interests. Such a drift of the mores is exactly analogous to a vice of an individual, i.e. energy is expended on acts which are